



Start a toddler group

'It is estimated that between a third and a half of all children in this country, aged under 3, regularly attend a church run toddler group.' (*'It's just the Toddler group'*, 2019)

With this in mind, it demonstrates the huge significance of toddler groups in the church. They are amongst one of the most exciting and important starting places for mission for both adults and children.

Starting a new group can seem like a big and challenging task, but here are some adapted ideas from Care for the Family to support you as you consider embarking on this exciting journey. Don't forget to start this whole journey with prayer, seeking God's will for the people in your community. Then begin to ask questions as below:

1. Is there a need for a toddler group?

It's easy to see quotes like that above and think that setting up a toddler group would be a great idea, but have you consulted those for whom a toddler group may apply? Find out what other groups exist in your local area. Don't start something in opposition to that which is already taking place. Consider approaching local professionals such as child minders, health visitors and local schools, and circulate a questionnaire to seek opinions and determine if there is a need.

If all your prayer and research returns a resounding 'yes', it's time to think about the type of group you are going to form. Do you want to run a toddler group, toddler praise, or a group just for dads? Hopefully you will have gained a feel for what is most desired from your research.

2. What support will you need?

We never recommend doing things in isolation. Who is going to help you and who will be on your team? For any group to be sustainable, teamwork is essential.

3. What are your aims?

Once your team is established, together you need to decide on the aims of the group. To use this as a missional group, think about how you can make your toddler group distinctively Christian, but in a sensitively appropriate way. Whatever aims you settle

on, ensure they are shared and understood by your team. This will help in your planning and preparation. You should also share your aims with the wider Church, after all this has the potential to be a significant part of your ministry. Review your aims annually to ensure they are still appropriate and relevant.

4. When will you meet?

Once you have established the purpose of your group, think about the best and most appropriate time to meet. Remember to consult those who you anticipate coming to the group. It needs to be at a time that works for them. Check out when other activities for this age group are going on and be sure you don't put this group on at the same time. Also, it's worth being aware that toddler groups tend to be a very fluid group. Due to the very nature of parents returning to work after maternity leave or pre-school hours kicking in, you may see a large number of children, parents, grandparents and carers passing through your doors, meaning you may need to review your meeting times annually, to be sure it meets the needs of those who are attending.

5. What will you do?

For this age group, we don't suggest any longer than a two hour session, for example, 9.30 am to 11.30 am or 1 pm to 3 pm. Activities could include free play, craft, story, music, singing, prayer or refreshments. The environment within which you hold the sessions is likely to determine the kinds of things you do. For example, if space is an issue, we suggest avoiding physical activities that involve toys such as bikes and slides. Get creative in how you use your space and think about providing sensory activities. Pinterest is full of ideas you can use.

Remember, this is a church toddler group, so don't be apologetic for sharing Bible stories or including a prayer activity, embrace those elements and do it creatively. A wonderful example we have seen in the Diocese, involved the leader using a candle as a sign that the children were gathering for their story, followed by a prayer and using a bubble machine where she explained that the children's prayers were being heard by God. The children knew that the bubble machine signalled that the session had ended. This part of the session always engaged adults and children.

You may choose to adopt a theme for the term or be guided by the church year. You can reflect the theme through play, craft, story, music, prayer and even the refreshments.

6. How will we resource our toddler group?

It is important to provide a variety of types of toys, which cover different ages and abilities. Furthermore, those toys should be clean, of quality and in full working order. The toys may be linked to the Bible story, but that is not essential. Ensure that there are tactile and sensory toys available. Think about babies, have you got a safe area for them?

This naturally makes us wonder where we can get suitable toys from. You may be able to get some from families whose children are moving beyond the toddler years, also,

look in charity shops. Also, speak to your Go Team Adviser, they may be able to point you in the direction of some suitable funding streams. We know of a number of toddler groups around the Diocese who have received generous funds to support their ministry.

7. Who will do what?

You have reached the point where you have your team, you have your vision and know what you are setting out to do. Teamwork is essential. You now need to allocate roles and responsibilities. Start by creating a list of what needs doing – for example, advertising, administration, finances, preparation, cleaning, health and safety, play, refreshments, craft, story and music. Allocate roles appropriately, thinking of peoples gifts and skills. We recommend reviewing roles and responsibilities regularly.

Health and safety is an important area. You will need to consider insurance, DBS requirements, risk assessments and child protect policies. We suggest you discuss with your incumbent and safeguarding officer.

For any further advice or help, contact your Archdeaconry based Go Team Adviser:
<https://www.bathandwells.org.uk/ministry/children-young-people/>